



Legislative Council Standing Committee

Legal and Social Issues

INQUIRY INTO END OF LIFE CHOICES

Submission from Hon Rod Mackenzie OAM

Patron and Life Member of Dying With Dignity Victoria

In the early 70's I witnessed the distressing and prolonged death of a close relative. To see the demise of an intelligent, well read and well loved woman over a long period of time and the slow deterioration that of all mental a physical facilities was a particularly distressing and stressful time for all friends and family and the patient herself.

In the latter part of the 70's as a Labor Party candidate I attended a State Conference at which was placed on each delegate's seat a brochure from the Voluntary Euthanasia Society of Victoria now Dying With Dignity Victoria. As a result of reading the brochure and because of my recent experience I joined the Society.

I became a member of the Victorian Legislative Council in 1979. In 1980 after discussion with members of the Voluntary Euthanasia Society I introduced a private member's bill entitled "*The Refusal of Medical Treatments Bill*". Although not allowing for assistance in dying it was a beginning to allow patients to have some rights to a say in their in their treatment when terminally ill. The bill was adjourned after some debate. I tried again in 1981 with the same result. In 1982 I became a member of the Government and lobbied two health ministers until it was given to the then Social Development Committee to hold an inquiry.

The inquiry lasted 18 months and ended with recommendation for legislation to be introduced which the Government did resulting in its passage through the Legislative Assembly although opposed by the Liberal/National party. When the bill came to the Council the final vote ended in a tie and ironically I as President had the casting vote and the legislation was passed after 8 years of lobbying.

As a Life Member, Patron and Ambassador for Dying With Dignity Victoria I have for many years talked to many organizations, written many newspaper articles and letters to politicians in an endeavour to have legislative change to allow the right for a person to have dignified end to their life.

There has been legislation passed now in a number of countries allowing physician assisted suicide. Successful legislation enacted years ago where there has been no adverse problems so there are several tried tested and successful pieces of legislation to model on.

I watched my 96 year old father and 98 year old mother die in cruel and unnecessary prolonged circumstances my father crying out for me to persuade the doctor to provide the means to end his life with dignity.

For over 30 years properly conducted surveys have consistently shown that 70 to 80% of the population support the right of a person to have a choice to die with dignity.

Hospice services provide invaluable assistance to the terminally ill but can only go so far. Pain can be controlled up to a point but what can't be controlled or alleviated is the suffering of indignity. To watch a proud man like my father lying almost totally immobile, unable to feed himself or control his body functions was the most stressful, humiliating and mentally painful thing for him and his family to experience where as if he had been a animal he would have been peacefully put to sleep.

Research carried out some years ago indicated that more terminally patients were assisted to die by their physician illegally in Australia than were legally assisted in Holland. This legislation is also about legal protection for Doctors.

This issue is about human rights the right for an individual when life has become intolerable and all quality of life has vanished to be able to instruct his physician either by voice or by previous written instruction to end it

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What angers me greatly that this is a private individual choice and it is denied me and 75% of

the population because a small number of often religiously motivated people frighten our timid politicians into avoiding addressing the issue which becomes more and more important as our aging population grows and medical science keeps progressing.

As the noted author, philosopher and churchman Dr Leslie Weatherhead said many years ago:

“I sincerely believe that those who come after us will wonder why on earth we kept a human being alive against his own will, when all dignity, beauty and meaning of life had vanished. When any gain to anyone was clearly impossible and when we would have been punished by the State if we had kept an animal alive in similar conditions”

Hon Rod Mackenzie OAM

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PS I would like to make a verbal submission if possible as well.